

One of the things that is very common for most of us at this time of year is to recall past Christmases – gatherings, celebrations, maybe even specific gifts or a specific encounter with someone in particular. Sometimes these are funny, happy memories – sometimes serious – sometimes even a little sad. But it is in these memories that we can see how we have developed in our outlook, our attitude; maybe even in our understanding of Christmas or human behaviour.

At this time of year I often have a memory – a mental picture – of a Christmas from my early childhood; while we weren't particularly well off; we certainly never thought of ourselves as 'poor'; but there wasn't a lot for extravagant gifts. But I clearly recall, as a little boy of four years old, seeing a package underneath a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, wrapped in bright red foil with ribbons and reflecting the lights on the tree.

And the package had my name on it.

I had no idea what was inside that package, but I knew (as you can imagine a four year old would) that it was something wonderful.

We gather to celebrate in Word and Sacrament, especially tonight, the Incarnation- of God coming among us as one of us – of the Almighty entering into our frail existence - of Jesus being born into our humanity as one of us.

We celebrate the unfolding of salvation history in a most wonderful way; of the birth of our Saviour in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago, fulfilling a promise made from the beginning of human history by God; that even then, as humans separated themselves from God through our own actions, God had put into motion a divine plan to bring us back into relationship with Himself for eternity.

The problem with the unfolding of the plan, though, was not a flaw in the plan itself or its author; the problem was in human understanding and seeing the plan as it unfolded.

Throughout the history of the children of Israel, from the first covenant with Abraham, God used His prophets and His people to bring an understanding of Him to others. Yet even His own chosen people often failed to grasp what it was God was saying to them, even as we do today.

The prophet Isaiah, some 500 years before the birth of Jesus, wrote of the coming Messiah, God's anointed one; one who would lead not only Israel, but all people, for all time, and bring them back to friendship, to relationship with God; as we heard in our first reading 'a people that walked in darkness have seen a great light'. That great light, the light of wisdom and understanding that what God wanted was not empires and tribute and sacrifices – he wanted freely returned love from His children; a relationship with His children; a return to what was intended from the beginning when He created us.

And yet, over human history, as God spoke through His prophets, somehow people came to believe that this chosen one, this Messiah was somehow supposed to be a great political ruler, or a military leader – one who would bring Israel from being a nation invaded by foreign powers to a free country, supreme over others. They put their own

expectation on what God had promised. In a sense, they took the ultimate gift from God and not only put it in a 'box' of their own design; in so doing, they really put God in the 'box', and determined how God should behave and react and provide for them...and isn't this something that we all occasionally do? Do we not all sometimes expect God to respond to our prayers in a certain way, or provide for us according to our own designs? But as we learn over time, if we try to confine God, if we try to limit God or define how God should respond or provide for us, we are always presented with something unexpected.

And it was no different 2000 years ago. In fact, the birth of a child in Bethlehem in poverty was most certainly not the picture that the people had painted for themselves of the coming of the Messiah. They had already put God in a box; and truly what a surprise they received.

St. Luke's Gospel tells us how the first to receive the wondrous news of this arrival of the Christ, of the Messiah, of the Son of God were shepherds. In Palestine, shepherds were not powerful people – in fact they were outcasts even among outcasts. They lived outside the cities and towns with their flocks, which meant they hardly had time to fulfill their obligations in the synagogues and temples; they were often ritually impure, and would have tended flocks alongside their pagan neighbours – and would have been looked down on by 'righteous' religious people as being no better than the pagans themselves. If one were expecting an event of great significance to be announced to the nation, shepherds would certainly have been the last ones that this news would have been given to first.

And yet, these are the ones that God sends His angels to announce the birth of Jesus; and the Gospel says they went 'with haste' to Bethlehem to see this wondrous thing that God had made known to them.

The truth is that God makes Himself known to us all the time. He is always near and is always sending His love and His messages and His care to us; the difficulty for us, as it was for the children of Israel; is that often we are not open to seeing Him where He truly is. In the difficult neighbour; in the demanding child; in the grieving and the lonely; the impoverished or the imprisoned; in the broken and the lost.

He is there – He is always there.

We need only to be open to Him – to receiving Him and to accepting Him in whatever 'packaging' He has presented Himself to us.

And whenever we are open to receiving Him as He is, and where He is, He will make Himself known to us;

And just like that little boy looking at that shiny present under the tree so many Christmases ago, there is a package with each of our names on it: We may not know exactly what is in that package before it is opened.

But we do know that when it is opened, it will be something wonderful.